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Feature

The Wild West of Executive Coaching

It's not just individuals who benefit from one-on-one coaching—their employers can gain immensely, too. But in an industry without universally accepted standards, all the parties need to be clear about their goals and how to reach them.

by *Stratford Sherman and Alyssa Freas*

When the senior vice president for organizational development at a leading U.S. bank first sought executive coaches for a few senior leaders, she faced a stampede. Kicking up dust were hundreds of applicants with wildly diverse qualifications, each expecting an interview. To make the selection process manageable, the VP established arbitrary criteria: Candidates needed some sort of coaching certification, plus five years of coaching experience at *Fortune* 500 financial services companies. The executive readily admitted to having no evidence that these criteria would identify good coaches. "I have to screen people somehow," she said. "So I am making stuff up."

Such is life in the untamed terrain of executive coaching. Like the Wild West of yesteryear, this frontier is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising. Reliable information about executive coaching is scarce, mainly because major companies did not use coaching much before the 1980s. Last year, Anthony M. Grant, who teaches coaching psychology at the University of Sydney, Australia, surveyed research on coaching of all kinds. He located only 131 peer-reviewed studies published since 1937. Of these, just 56 were empirical, and few met standards of reliable methodology. "In general," Grant said, "the quality of the research is extremely poor." Although capable scholars are now crowding into the field, years may pass before they can map out authoritative guides for coaching.

Meanwhile, companies that use coaches to help their top executives become more effective must chart their own courses. No one has yet demonstrated conclusively what makes an executive coach qualified or what makes one approach to executive coaching better than another. Barriers to entry are nonexistent—many self-styled executive coaches know little about business, and some know little about coaching. At best, the coaching certifications offered by various self-appointed bodies are difficult to assess, while methods of measuring return on investment are questionable. "I don't think ROI is ever going to be able to measure the true success of coaching, so we assess the value with qualitative data," says Wendy Gabriel, the manager of executive coaching at Deloitte & Touche USA. What is clear is that the market has spoken. Many of the world's most admired corporations, from GE to Goldman Sachs, invest in coaching. Annual spending on coaching in the United States is estimated at roughly \$1 billion.

The growing popularity of executive coaching is a response to compelling needs. Many of the new business practices that so greatly improved productivity in recent decades also introduced contradictions into the relationships between corporations and their top executives. The most bedeviling of these has been a gradual warping of the traditional alignment of companies and their leaders. Developing more fruitful ways for businesses and executives to work together has become a priority and a new source of economic value.

It was long overdue. For centuries, businesses thrived while treating employees as commodities. Laborers were "hands," a status scarcely superior to that of horses or oxen. With the publication of *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor extended this dehumanization to include executives, arguing that even great individual leaders will be bested by efficiently organized groups of "ordinary men." He wrote, "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first." By 1956, when William Whyte styled the

executive of his age as the “organization man,” the transformation of leaders into commodities had gone about as far as it could.

What might be called the rehumanization of executives began during the 1970s, when successive waves of change—including the globalization of competition, a growing demand for services, and the acceleration and restructuring of business processes through information technology—battered traditional organizations. Struggling to respond, U.S. corporations launched a vast, decades-long rethinking of organizational structures and work processes. Among the casualties were employees suddenly deemed redundant. The demise of job security created a new career model—Me, Inc.—which eliminated loyalty to employers.

Nowhere did this idea take hold more powerfully than in the executive suite. At the same time, companies seeking speed and competitive agility were granting leaders unprecedented influence by delegating to them vastly more autonomy and authority. Increasingly, attention was focused on the unique value embodied in specific human beings. That balding CFO was no longer a commodity but a living vessel of “intellectual capital”—a resource regarded as no less precious than money itself.

For their part, managers of leaner, faster-moving organizations began to recognize the need for a subtler set of competencies: the communication and relationship skills required to influence and energize employees, adaptability to rapid change, and respect for people of diverse backgrounds. Today, executives expect emotional intelligence from supervisors and colleagues but find it’s in scarce supply.

Despite all the progress made in other business disciplines, and all the preaching by charismatic business gurus, today’s corporations remain ill-equipped to resolve whole categories of employee-related dilemmas. For instance, objective assessments and candid feedback are seen as essential to executives’ development, yet supervisors of all ranks generally don’t provide such feedback to subordinates. Why don’t they? Candor generates emotion, and emotion can be scary.

Some companies have found new ways to structure mutually satisfactory relationships with their best people and to foster their employees’ development in line with organizational goals. Many others have not. Companies still groping for solutions need something management science lacks: a systematic means of engaging with senior leaders as individuals.

Enter executive coaching.

Why Executive Coaching Works

Unlike most business processes, which tend to reduce information to abstractions, executive coaching engages with people in customized ways that acknowledge and honor their individuality. It helps people know themselves better, live more consciously, and contribute more richly. The essentially human nature of coaching is what makes it work—and also what makes it nearly impossible to quantify.

Executive coaching is distinct from other types of coaching. The broader field of coaching includes life planning, career counseling, health and nutritional advice, New Age aura readings, and training in skills from public speaking to flirtation. We don’t do that stuff. Our role is to help “coachees”—the people being coached—produce business results for their employers. Executive coaching is also distinct from psychotherapy; indeed, people who need therapy tend to make poor candidates for coaching. That said, most executive coaching is intellectually indebted to a small number of disciplines, including consulting, management, organizational development, and psychology.

At the most basic level, coaches serve as outsourced suppliers of candor, providing individual leaders with the objective feedback needed to nourish their growth. The data often come from 360-degree surveys of the people who work most closely with a given individual—a boss, peers, and direct reports—and sometimes customers or family members. Well-constructed 360s can identify particular behaviors with great precision and link them to corporate goals, values, and leadership models. By aggregating subjective judgments and making them anonymous, 360s generate statistical data with a helpful patina of objectivity and legitimacy. While the judgments are not always fair, they represent actual perceptions. For that reason, 360s can provide priceless insight into the subject’s interpersonal environment. Even coaches of modest attainment can add value by delivering such information.

It is remarkable how many smart, highly motivated, and apparently responsible people rarely pause to contemplate their own behavior. Often more inclined to move on than to reflect deeply, executives may reach the top ranks without addressing their limitations. Coaching gets them to slow down, gain awareness, and notice the effects of their words and actions. That enables coachees to perceive choices rather than simply react to events; ultimately, coaching can empower them to assume responsibility for their impact on the world.

Coaching doesn’t end with self-awareness. It is a form of active learning that transfers essential communication and relationship skills. Strategic coaching should integrate personal development and organizational needs. This approach can help leaders adapt to new responsibilities, reduce destructive behaviors, improve retention with a perceived perk, enhance teamwork, align individuals to collective goals, facilitate succession, and support organizational change. Systematic coaching programs, reaching whole cadres of executives, provide a disciplined way for organizations to deepen relationships with their most important employees while increasing their effectiveness. The most valuable coaching fosters cultural change for the benefit of the entire organization.

Working the Triangle

Our executive coaching consists of highly personal one-on-one and team interventions between coaches and senior executives, and it usually lasts several months. Such coaching is fundamentally a business proposition. Its purpose is to produce learning, behavioral change, and growth in the coachee for the economic benefit of a third party—the client that employs the coachee. On a personal level, we are deeply committed to helping our coachees lead better lives, but coaching succeeds only when that benefit comes in addition to business results.

Coaching creates a triangular relationship between the coach who provides the service, the coachee who receives the coaching, and the client that pays the coaching bills. The client actually is a collection of interested parties, usually including the coachee's boss—a key player—and the human resources department. The work succeeds when all the people involved agree on explicit goals that genuinely further their own interests as well as the common good.

To understand how the triangular relationship works, consider Saphra Marker (we have changed all the names in our examples to protect our clients' identities), an executive vice president at a leading financial services company: forward-thinking, rational, extremely competent—and volatile. When her coaching began, she was up for a promotion to a high rank on the firm's leadership council. Saphra's boss, Will Powers, was her strongest supporter, but he also perceived she had significant development issues. The company was dedicated to teamwork, but Saphra, a hard-driving former accountant, was reluctant to share resources, frequently abrasive with colleagues, and often “too busy” to develop her direct reports. A couple of Saphra's colleagues were consciously avoiding her in an unspoken standoff that was gumming up important work. The client decided to get involved. Will asked an HR specialist to get Saphra a coach. From a roster selected by HR to match her needs, Saphra chose someone to work with.

Coaching persuaded Saphra to take stock. Her 360-degree feedback confirmed both her outstanding abilities and the problems Will had observed. Analyzing the feedback with her coach, Saphra realized that her behavior was inhibiting her progress. Like most coachees, she was stung by the straight talk and needed courage and compassionate support to confront herself. Once she digested the feedback, though, Saphra was ready to change. Together with her coach, she focused on three areas for improvement: maintaining composure under pressure, mentoring direct reports, and developing more trusting relationships with peers.

Saphra took the coaching plan to Will and, after incorporating his suggestions, won his agreement. Then Saphra and her coach began their private work together. For example, Saphra's coach asked her to keep a journal, noting each time she lost her cool, along with the person involved, the provocation, her responses, and the outcome. By discussing her issues more or less candidly with Will and her colleagues, Saphra created a network of people interested in supporting her ongoing growth. Simple stuff, but it was enough to help Saphra dig herself out of the hole. By the end of her coaching, Saphra had mastered the basic mechanics of keeping her cool, mentoring subordinates, and strengthening relationships with peers. She also had acquired a precious new skill: the ability to monitor her behavior and consciously adjust it as needed. And, yes, she got the promotion.

In this instance, the coaching worked because the triangular nature of the coaching relationship was acknowledged right from the start. The coach focused on business objectives. Will helped shape those objectives. And, significantly, Saphra was determined to learn and change. The stars were aligned.

Qualification, Qualification, Qualification

The intervention with Saphra succeeded, but what about bad coaching? Obviously, it is widely available, wastes lots of money, and can even do harm. All three parties in a triangular relationship—the coach, the coachee, and the client—can contribute to failure. The best way to maximize the likelihood of good results is to qualify all three parties. Even novice clients recognize the need to assess coaches' qualifications, though they may not know how to do it. But clients are far less likely to consider coachees' qualifications—or their own.

Let's start with the client. Long before selecting a vendor, a potential client should candidly examine itself and ask, “What is the point of the coaching program?” Companies can back into coaching with no plan at all. A senior executive hears good things about coaching and unilaterally decides to try it. Or HR arranges coaching, in ones and twos, for individuals at risk of derailing. Only after a tangle of inconsistent, ad hoc coaching reveals itself does anyone stop to establish policies and goals.

Start with clear intentions about how coaching will further important goals. Once the end is in mind, design systems to support it. If you want coaching to advance strategic aims or embed values, think about how to integrate coaching with other initiatives and systems, such as compensation, evaluation, and job assignment. Many HR professionals struggle to sustain coaching programs on their own, but they shouldn't have to do that. For coaching to command serious attention from the busy executives it aims to help, it needs top-level support and visible links to business imperatives.

Let's turn now to the coaches. The best ones ground their work in the coachee's environment: relationships at all levels, plus the values, goals,

and dynamics of the client's business. An effective coach helps a coachee achieve agreed-upon goals, while also transferring the knowledge and skills needed to sustain ongoing development. Like good parents, good coaches foster independence.

Great coaches sniff out hidden truths. They tend to be curious and ask penetrating questions. The ability to turn over rocks and discover what lies beneath is critical because business conversations—including briefings to coaches—often omit essential issues. For instance, the CEO of a privately held manufacturer brought us in without revealing that he wanted his son to replace him as CEO—or that the other family members on the company's board of directors viewed the son as unqualified. This set of hidden agendas proved to be far more important than the overt issues our coaching program was supposed to address.

Accomplished coaches that have different backgrounds, relying on widely varying techniques, can produce similar results. Until a body of knowledge about coaching wins acceptance, we'll remain skeptical of current efforts to introduce universal standards and high barriers to entry. For now, clients will best serve their needs by evaluating coaches individually.

Because no universally reliable credential exists to identify capable coaches, that task requires subtlety. References from previous clients and coachees always merit careful review. But coaching remains as much art as science, best practiced by individuals with acute perception, diplomacy, sound judgment, and the ability to navigate conflicts with integrity. Perhaps the most important qualifications are character and insight, distilled as much from the coach's personal experience as from formal training. Pay close attention to chemistry and the matching of coach to coachee. In certain situations, a coach's doctorate degree, or prior experience as a CEO, or background in psychology may indeed be highly relevant. In other situations, a coach with the same credentials may be inappropriate. Mental health professionals are swelling the ranks of executive coaches and many do excellent work. But a skilled psychologist may be, for example, too naive about business to win an executive's trust.

Finally, it's important to qualify the executive to be coached. More companies should adopt the systematic approach of LSG Sky Chefs, a Lufthansa subsidiary that provides food services globally. No leader at LSG Sky Chefs gets coaching until an internal panel has evaluated his readiness and suitability for coaching and approved a preliminary plan showing how coaching will deliver results. In a less ideal environment, a client can try to identify coaching candidates by answering these basic questions: Is the executive motivated? Can we identify an important development need? Is the executive coachable? Does she have support? Is he valuable enough to justify the cost of coaching?

When qualifying potential candidates, remember that people need motivation and commitment to benefit from coaching. Think about it: The coachee does the hard work, while everyone else contributes from the sidelines. The only time we'd recommend inducing someone to get coaching involuntarily is when an entire layer of management receives coaching as part of a larger strategic effort.

Clients should consider coaching to meet candidates' development needs—to address potential problems and growth opportunities. For instance, coaching can help leaders in transition, such as those moving from jobs in operations to positions of enterprise leadership that require "soft" interpersonal skills as well as execution ability. But coaching cannot ameliorate deep-seated psychological problems, such as chronic depression. We try not to take on problems we can't solve, and when an executive needs help that we can't provide, we suggest engaging professionals with appropriate qualifications. Whatever the situation, when qualifying an executive, clients should make sure that coaching is something the executive really wants—and that her efforts to change and grow will be appreciated and nourished by her boss and critical colleagues. Such support is what sustains and enhances the benefits of coaching.

Hakim Alaoui was a gifted financier hired from outside who had undercut his success with a brusque, seemingly selfish manner that alienated his new colleagues. The CEO, who valued Hakim, wanted him "fixed." In this case, the coach had to determine whether Hakim, who knew he was in trouble, actually wanted to cultivate a more collegial style. Discussing his options with the coach, Hakim realized that combining his outstanding professional skills with better relationships at work could make him substantially more valuable—regardless of which company employed him. So he committed himself to the coaching process with a zeal that reflected his outsized ambition and favorably impressed the CEO. After three months of coaching and corporate support, Hakim started helping colleagues. He began sponsoring teams that worked across organizational boundaries, even in cases where the teams' work helped the company at the expense of Hakim's own area. People started to enjoy collaborating with him. Last we heard, Hakim was still with the company and thriving.

It goes without saying that in qualifying coaching candidates, clients should look at the specific business payoffs the coaching will provide. Experienced clients are less likely than newcomers to invest coaching dollars in repairing people problems, preferring to concentrate coaching investments on their best employees. That makes sense for two reasons. Extended one-on-one coaching can be far more costly, per capita, than many other learning techniques. And executives flee from coaching when it becomes a badge of career trouble. Most clients will find it easy to decide whether a particular executive is valuable enough to justify the cost of coaching. Many, including Raytheon CEO William H. Swanson, believe that executives with high potential should receive coaching as early in their careers as possible.

Contract Early—and Often

Triangular relationships generate conflict. As in the classic film comedy *Ninotchka*, Russia's communist bureaucrats once sent emissaries abroad in groups of three, on the theory that if one wanted to defect, at least one of the others would squeal. The coaching triangle needn't be so

Machiavellian, but it does generate productive tensions. The key to exploiting them is through effective contracting. By “contracting,” we mean not just documenting the legal and financial aspects of coaching, but also defining the goals, roles, and accountability of each party. It works when each term gains the uncoerced agreement of all concerned: client, coach, and coachee.

Central to our contracting philosophy is the action plan, a living document that fleshes out the goals initially defined in the legal contract. We recommend setting measurable goals, usually three, that coaching realistically can achieve. Typically, action plans are expressed in terms of specific behaviors: Being a good listener, for instance, comes up all the time. Evidently, listening isn't what business schools teach.

Together, the three parties should choose goals that maximize mutual interests. If the client has a strategic objective and the executive has a career objective, for example, they must identify a goal that integrates both aims. Here's how it worked for Ellen Rinaldo, a manufacturing executive operating near the top of a complex matrix organization. She underwent a 360-degree evaluation, which showed that she was ineffective at engaging groups led by others. Her response was tactical: She proposed a goal of improving her presentations before large groups. Her boss and coach transformed that into a strategic goal of working more effectively across organizational boundaries.

The more explicit these conversations are, the better. We encourage vigorous, candid debate, clear boundaries of confidentiality, and defined accountabilities for each participant. Indeed, making things explicit is a best practice in itself. No standard template for coaching action plans or metrics exists; our process induces coaching participants to devise terms that will produce the specific outcomes they want. Designing action plans is an iterative process that should continue as new insights emerge. We may renegotiate plans months after they're set if new information reveals a path that will produce significantly better results. That adaptability sometimes surprises clients and coachees accustomed to off-the-rack solutions. Too bad. Our service is tailored and requires fittings.

To produce results, coaching goals should be measurable. If your goal is to stop infuriating colleagues, after coaching you'd better ask those colleagues whether you still infuriate them. If a CEO wants leaders to embody professed values, we would define particular behaviors that express those values; incorporate questions about them into a 360-degree instrument; and, once feedback is in, base individual coaching goals on the particular values in which each person falls short. After coaching, we would measure feedback on precisely the same key behaviors. Measurements should take human complexities into account, such as how the coachee achieves results. We often create custom mini-360 assessments, narrowly focused on specific coaching goals. Using the same people to rate the executives before and after coaching, these assessments measure the amount of perceived change on each scale. A secondary value of follow-up assessments is that they give colleagues a chance to reconsider their views. Otherwise, first impressions tend to stick. It's sometimes easier to improve a coachee's behavior than it is to win acknowledgment of positive change.

Coaching contracts should reflect the sensitive nature of the task. Ours usually include a no-fault escape clause, permitting any party to terminate a coaching relationship that isn't working. When we find ourselves in an engagement that isn't working for one reason or another, we exit. That's awkward, but it saves clients money and improves results.

Good contracting generates discussions that test interpersonal chemistry, while subjecting the potentially wild and woolly process of coaching to businesslike discipline. Reaching explicit agreements about goals, measures, and accountabilities brings the parties into closer alignment even before the supposed real work of coaching has begun. The contracting process enables the coach to engage the boss's active participation and to start indoctrinating the boss in coaching techniques. These conversations lead the people at each point of the triangle to contemplate the unfamiliar terrain of coaching and increase their readiness for the hard work ahead.

While our approach to contracting requires effort up front, our advice is to do the hard work and don't be shy about it. Discuss what needs to be discussed—and do it candidly. Insist on genuine commitments. Identify conflicts and iron them out. Be explicit. And when the stars are not aligned for a particular coaching intervention, don't be afraid to give up. The triangular nature of coaching generates friction, but it is also the source of great benefits. Take full advantage of it.

Coaching for Strategic Change

Worthy as it is to help one person or team, the most valuable executive coaching comes from developing an organization's entire senior executive rank. In most organizations, lasting change usually proceeds slowly, one person at a time, gaining momentum as more people buy in. To accelerate change and make it stick, we recommend systematically coordinating one-on-one coaching interventions that serve a larger strategic objective.

When an organizationwide perspective guides coaching, you don't fully qualify individual candidates; instead, you qualify the circumstances under which such a coaching program makes sense. You want to have a compelling business reason why executives should participate wholeheartedly in being coached. That could be as simple as making sure leaders live the company's values or as subtle as planting the seeds of a companywide culture of coaching.

It's best to launch any coaching program only after it has won enthusiastic endorsements from top management, preferably including the CEO—who should be interested in those executives who are senior or promising enough to merit coaching. Because coaching, by its nature, brings

uncomfortable subjects to light, these programs need an active champion with the power (including staying power) to protect them. CEO participation is good for ordinary coaching, but it's essential for coaching programs that support significant organizational change. That is why we recommend that such programs start with the CEO and top management and then spread across organizational boundaries. When senior leaders serve as role models and champions, coaching programs gain traction and credibility.

If the responsible chief is not involved, we always ask why. To be frank, we don't always get good answers. Two years before his mandatory retirement, one CEO, the head of a major technology company, ordered coaching for his top team to address succession issues. His HR staff handpicked a team of coaches from diverse sources who had not collaborated before. The program the company designed did not touch on team development or alignment with the organization's strategic intention. The CEO chose not to receive coaching himself. Outcome? Although each coachee benefited personally, the strategic impact on the organization was nil.

However, when a business chief truly commits to a thoughtful coaching process, the results can be outstanding. Just ask Harry Minkowski, president of an extremely successful multibillion-dollar unit that produces much of the profit at a premier entertainment company. "To make a project like this work," he said, "you need a top manager who is really putting his heart and soul into this thing, letting people know it is a requirement, and making sure people face the consequences if they don't fully participate in the process."

The problem at Harry's organization was familiar. During the previous two years, the complexity of the business had increased tenfold while headcount remained steady. Everyone was working flat out. "We should have had perfect harmony because our results were great and getting better," he recalled. "But we were seeing the worst of people's behavior. And I noticed something: Every single person had a clear window onto everyone else. Their complaints about others were dead on. But they had no insight into themselves. They all had a great window and a bad mirror. That's what I wanted to fix."

We collaborated with Harry to design a coaching program that fit his needs. It included 360-degree feedback and coaching for all top managers, Harry included, as well as team coaching for the group. Each manager was obliged to develop an action plan based on individual feedback, share it with her supervisor and colleagues, and, after several months, demonstrate results via a mini-360. The managers also created and pursued a team action plan. Along the way, we ran custom workshops to explain and support the process.

Here's Harry's account of the result: "I said that if half the people changed half their behaviors half the time, I'd be thrilled. But we have changed 95% of the behaviors in 100% of the people 95% of the time. Nobody learned anything they didn't know already—the difference now is that they act on it. The result was the most profound, incredible change. They treat each other better. They get into fewer conflicts. And when they do get into a conflict, they usually resolve it without coming to me." Much of the credit for these improvements goes to Harry.

There's another advantage to starting at the top: Once senior leaders have changed their behavior, it's easier for them to influence subordinates to do the same. Then change can cascade down from the top. João Morais, the CEO of an overseas consumer-products outfit that had famous brands but not enough oomph, set a strategic goal of increasing revenue growth. He created a three-year, companywide campaign to improve managers' coaching skills. First, he and all his division presidents underwent 360-degree feedback evaluations, followed by six months of coaching to help the leaders become better coaches themselves. Phase two was a leader-as-coach program that introduced coaching skills into the organization, layer by layer. It succeeded because João and the senior leaders served as role models. The widely observed changes in their behavior convinced others that the program was for real. Over time, the accumulation of managers with coaching skills improved the work environment for thousands of employees.

When you create a culture of coaching, the results may not be directly measurable in dollars. But we have yet to find a company that can't benefit from more candor, less denial, richer communication, conscious development of talent, and disciplined leaders who show compassion for people.

The Wild West of executive coaching isn't for everyone. Some individuals can't overcome their discomfort with personal inquiry, just as some organizations can't muster the necessary respect for people. But for those who recognize the value of bringing individuals and organizations into alignment, the considerable difficulties and uncertainties of executive coaching are outweighed by the benefits of creating a new kind of enterprise that knows how to capitalize on the human qualities of its employees.

As long as there are human beings doing the work, businesses can profit by creating more fruitful relationships with them.